

Well, we're three weeks into the New Year – we've all probably made and already broken our New Year's resolutions by now! So there's no point me talking about that, then! I want us to think about how we as Christians move into the future with assurance and certainty. How can we make sure we're on the right lines?

We're going to be looking for a few moments into the book of Hebrews, where the writer is encouraging the believing Jews to persevere in their new-found faith in Jesus, even though the way is tough. They have been convinced that faith in a crucified and risen Saviour is the only way to salvation; chapter 5, verse 9 tells us that Jesus '*became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*'. But now they're facing increasing persecution and difficulty, so how do they cope? How can they persevere? Same questions for us - how do we cope? How can we persevere?

I want us to consider the opening verses in chapter 12 of Hebrews, but to see how it fits into the book we need to remind ourselves of what has been written in chapter 11; the opening verses of chapter 12 round off chapter 11, and tell us what our response should be.

You'll remember that chapter 11 begins with these words: "*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.*" And then the writer reels off a list of characters from Israel's history, people who **characterised** this faith in God – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and he has to end up by saying that he could go on and on, but he hasn't got time to mention all the examples of people who lived by faith alone.

So in chapter 11, the writer calls upon the great people of faith in the history of God's people as examples to inspire his readers. Their faithfulness is for the encouragement for all who follow them.

Verse 13 says, "*All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.*" They lived by faith in God, no matter where it took them, no matter what they had to go through. Let's read together from chapter 11, verse 36.

*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by **such a great cloud of witnesses**,”* (v. 1)
We as readers of this book, are given chapter 11 to encourage us and inspire us to live by faith, because so many have gone before doing just that, and have been commended by God for it.

They lived by faith in God, believing that he would fulfil his promise to them. They looked **forward** to a Messiah, a Redeemer, a Saviour, but died without seeing him. They believed that God would bring them into his kingdom, but didn't experience it in their lifetime. They still lived by faith. They went through awful experiences because of their faith in their God, but they persevered in their faith. So should the Hebrew Christians, so should we.

We can take encouragement and inspiration from these characters from history – we're surrounded by many who have lived by faith and have been commended for it by God. They faced struggles, they faced battles, they had faith in God and they found him to be completely faithful – now it's **our** turn to face those same struggles and battles, to have faith in God and we too will find God completely faithful to **us**. Are you a believer? Do you have faith in God? Now is the time to live by faith alone and you will find God is faithful to you. “Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,” we often sing.

How do **we** go on in our faith? How can we make sure we make it to heaven? How can **we** be commended for our faith, like these people? Won't it be great to hear the Lord welcome us into heaven with the words we read in Jesus' parable of the tenants: *‘Well done, good and faithful servant. ... Come and share your Master's happiness.’* Matthew 23:21. We wouldn't want to miss out, would we? What a tragedy. Our verses here help us – let's look a bit closer.

[Re-read 12:1]

The British Olympic Committee met recently to discuss ways to make the London Games in 2012 distinctly **British**. They talked about lots of different ways to make it a celebration to remember because of its **British** flavour. One of the decisions Sebastian Coe and the committee came to was concerning what all the athletes are to wear. They thought about what clothes the rest of the world would recognise as **epitomising** Britain. So they've decided that when they run their races all British athletes are to wear smart three-piece suits – jackets, trousers and waistcoats, preferably black pin-striped, white shirts, black tie and highly polished black shoes. This clothing, they say, will make our athletes stand out as they run their races, and people will remember these Games for their **Britishness**.

They also thought that the image would be complete if our athletes also wore a bowler hat and carried a briefcase and a brolly. Aren't you glad to be British?

Before you despair totally of what the world and our country in particular is coming to, I'd better say that I've just made this up. But I hope you see that to decide something like this would be totally **ridiculous** – a very amusing image, though – can you picture it? An athlete jumping over hurdles in a jacket and tie with a briefcase under his arm, or Chris Hoy on a bike in a suit and bowler and carrying a brolly! Totally ridiculous. Athletes nowadays are wearing less and less, their costumes so tight to reduce air resistance; in fact so skin tight, they're tighter than skin.

*'Let us **throw off** everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,'* . We're in a race. We can't afford to be hindered. We can't afford to be slowed down. This race has **eternal** consequences. We can't afford to be tripped up by our shoelaces as we run around the track. We can't afford to be held back by our jacket flapping in the wind. We have to throw off everything that hinders, **throw** it off – not just take it off, fold it up and place it just there so we can reach down for it and put it on again. No, throw it off! As far as you can throw it – miles away. Get rid **totally** of anything and **everything** that hinders.

What stops you making progress and running the race? Spending time with those people rather than God's people? Throw it off! Reading fiction rather than God's Word? Throw it off! Watching telly rather than praying? Throw it off! Going out with friends rather than going to the service? Throw it off! Indulging yourself rather than giving to God? Throw it off! It all has to go! Everything that hinders must be thrown away – it's not worth it – eternal rewards are at stake, here.

Perhaps there's a sin that easily entangles you. While we're in this life we are open to temptation. Let's be honest, we **all** know of sin in our life that we are particularly susceptible to. And **right now** it will be there in your mind. You know what I'm talking about. It may be something that nobody else knows about. But **you** know, and **God** knows. The devil is cunning and will try and convince us that we cannot do without indulging in that sin.

1 Peter 5:8 tells us, *'Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.'* He will do all he can to stop you running the race, he's just looking for your weak point. The sin that easily entangles you. But Peter then says, *'Resist him, standing firm in the faith.'*

And Peter wouldn't have urged his readers to resist the devil if he knew it wasn't possible. You **can** resist the devil. You **can** resist your temptation to sin. Jesus died and rose again victorious over sin and death – he has removed the power of sin, it no longer has a hold on those who believe in the saving power of Jesus.

Peter also writes, *'For Christ died for sins once for all ... to bring you to God.'* 1 Peter 3:18. Sins no longer have power over God's people. *'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.'* Romans 8:1. But Paul also says that there is a struggle going on inside each of us; he writes in Romans 7 *'I do not understand what I do. For what I **want** to do I do **not** do, but what I **hate** I do.'* Romans 7:15. There is a war being waged he says inside us – we constantly have to battle against the bad things our old sinful nature wants us to do. This is true isn't it? True to life.

'Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,' . Throw it off, get rid. You have to **do** something – it may be harder for some than others – but we can't just sit back and hope it'll all turn out right in the end. We have to **do** something to win the victory at the end of the race. Food for thought – we all have to search our hearts and minds to see what needs throwing off.

Verse 1 continues, *'and let us **run** with perseverance the race marked out for us.'* The race is already marked out for us. The track is laid. The easiest way out of our road in the snow the last two weeks was to make sure our car was in the tracks left by the big 4by4s. The track is there. There is only one way. The route is mapped out for us. There's no point turning up for a 400 metre race, when you're only going to run 200 metres. There's no point starting to run a 1500 metre race and you set off on the marathon route. You'll never reach the winning line. God has already marked out the race for us.

I used to really enjoy running cross-country when I was at school, and by the time I left I was second-best in the school – never quite managed to be the best. I was picked for the school cross-country team, but I only ever won once. It was a cold, foggy winter day and it was an **away** fixture so of course we didn't know the route - we had to look at a map and a teacher talked us through it.

We set off and I was quite near the back – tactics! We came to a wood, and everyone carried on running around the wood.

But I was **sure** we'd been told to cut through the **middle** of the wood, and fortunately one of the home team thought so too. So we went through the middle of the wood.

When we came out the other side, we were ahead of the rest, I raced on and won. The rest said we'd cheated by taking a short cut, but we had, in fact taken the right course. I won because I followed the track as it had been marked out.

The Way is clear – Jesus is the way. We follow him. Like in the snow recently, the safest way to get along the pathway is to tread in other people's footsteps. We are to tread the way that Jesus has trod, to go where he has gone before us. The race is already marked out.

But we must **run**, and run with **perseverance**. And for this we need training, but all the hard work is **worth** it because of the rewards waiting for us at the winning line. Let's just read what Paul has to say about this race in 1 Corinthians 9: 24 onwards [read 1 Cor. 9:24-27].

We need strict training in whatever will help us to reach that winning line – studying God's Word, spending time in prayer, meeting with God's people for mutual encouragement, taking the bread and the wine to remember what Jesus did for us, sharing the Good News – these are the things we need to be trained in. We have to run the race **marked out for us** or we will be disqualified; we have to run with **perseverance**, or we will drop out exhausted; we have to run to **win the prize** – a crown that will last forever – eternal life with God.

Another word for perseverance is endurance – run with endurance. It's not a sprint – it's a strenuous race and it requires endurance. But we follow Jesus; **he** endured hostility and opposition; he endured pain, suffering, rejection. And this is what Christians are called to, because Christ himself suffered on the cross. James reminds us '*Consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*' James 1:2-4. Consider it pure joy, develop perseverance, be complete, fit for everlasting life in heaven.

Great isn't it? And let's remember that the whole cloud of witnesses of chapter 11 and 12, verse 1 serve to encourage and inspire us, to urge us on in the race, to win the prize that **they** have **already** won through **their** perseverance in faith.

'let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.'

How can we throw off all that entangles? How can we run the race with perseverance? Only by fixing our eyes on Jesus. Verse 2 [read verses 2,3]

*'Let's **fix our eyes** on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.'*

Our eyes are so very important to us, aren't they? So much that goes on inside us is influenced by our eyes, by what they see.

Many of you will have heard of the hymn-writer Fanny Crosby. Despite being blind from birth, she sang and played the piano and guitar and she was teacher of History and English. She wrote over **8000** songs, including wonderful classics such as 'To God be the glory, great things he has done', and 'Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine', and 'All the way my Saviour leads me'. She had to write under nearly 100 different **names**, because some publishers wouldn't include a lot of hymns by the same writer in their books.

She said, 'It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I **thank God** for this dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would **not** accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me.'

And that's right, isn't it? There are so many things which demand our attention, aren't there? There are so many distractive influences that we just can't ignore, because our eyes are pulled this way and that, to see beautiful things, or interesting things, and sometimes we just **have** to see the horrible things too; just to say we've seen it. Will our lives be that much poorer if there are things that we've never seen? If we have a right view of what's important – our life for eternity - they won't. Will the fact that I've never seen a whale spouting spoil my life with God? If I've never seen the latest winner of the X-Factor perform live, will that mean I won't find my reward in heaven? What if I've never seen Barbados or Bermuda? In the big picture – God's picture – it will matter **nothing** that my eyes have not seen these things.

Fanny Crosby also said: 'When I get to heaven, the first face that shall ever gladden my sight, will be that of my Saviour.' What a lovely thought – I almost feel envious – the first face she has ever seen is that of Jesus, the one who died and rose for her. Wonderful.

*'Let's **fix our eyes** on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.'*

We have to fix our eyes on Jesus, keep them there, not be distracted, not be blinkered in what we allow our eyes to see.

I don't like going on roller-coasters, big dippers, and ferris wheels – they make me feel sick. Someone told me when I was on a big wheel that I should look at the horizon, because it didn't move, it was sure, and if I focused fully on the horizon, I'd be able to ignore the feelings that made me feel unwell.

In all the ups and downs of life, through all the trials and tribulations we go through, when faced with everything that would distract us, we should fix our eyes on Jesus. He is the one person that remains the same yesterday, today and forever – he will not change, he will not move; he is the Son of God, who was, and is and is to come. Don't let yourselves be distracted by all the things moving here, now, right in front of you; let's fix our eyes on Jesus.

What is vitally important to us then, is that we see Jesus. That we see what he has done for us, in dying on the cross. He is the author and perfecter of our faith. In Hebrews 2:10, Jesus is referred to as *“the author of their salvation,”* – he is the only way to eternal life. On the cross, Jesus cried out *‘It is finished!’* Jesus offered the final and complete sacrifice for sin – Hebrews 10:10 says, *“we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus once for all.”*

The letter to the Hebrews was written to reinforce the truth that Jesus is better in every way than what the Hebrew Christians had known before:

- He is the perfect revelation of God – in chapter 1 verse 3 we read, *“The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.”*
- In chapters 1 and 2 we read he is superior to angels;
- In chapters 3 and 4 we see that he is superior to the Jewish leaders;
- In chapters 4 to 7 the writer writes that Jesus is superior to their priests.

In every way, Jesus is superior and totally sufficient for salvation.

How important is this news for us today too – whatever we find to focus on – it may be family, it may be work, it may be material prosperity, whatever we fix our eyes on – **Jesus** is better – true fulfilment and satisfaction is **only** found in him, eternal life **only** through belief that Jesus died for our sins, and rose again.

Let's fix our eyes on Jesus.

Philippians chapter 2 tells us what he has done for us: He stepped down from glory in heaven, he endured the anguish of the cross, he completed the work of salvation when he rose again, defeating sin and death, he sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. He's done everything for us, so that we can run the race that **he**'s marked out for us, right to the winning line, it's in sight.

Whenever you find that things are getting you down, things are hindering your progress, sin is too easily entangling you, when you feel you're not running the race because you are weary and exhausted, fix your eyes on Jesus; remember that he has run the race perfectly before you, he ran to the finish, you can rely totally on him to help you to that winning line.

He endured the cross, because of the joy set before him – the joy of knowing that he had completed the work of salvation, the joy of knowing that you will see his salvation. We can run the race with perseverance with joy set before us – the joy of knowing that if we always have our eyes on Jesus, he will meet us at the winning line, and he will say, *'Come and share your Master's happiness.'*